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VIETNAM: YESTERDAY, TODAY AND TOMORROW

In March 2005 I returned to Vietnam for the first time since I was there doing research for a doctorate during the war in South Vietnam in 1974. The purpose of this article is to recap on the country's history, to look at the state of Vietnam today, and to provide two contrasting speculations on how it could progress into the future.



Yesterday

Vietnam is the only country to have beaten off three of the five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council: China, France and the United States. No other country has this record. It has a formidable tradition of resistance

China has been the longest running enemy of Vietnam. Most of the heroes in Vietnamese history have been people who have fought against China. This line of fighters goes all the way back to at least AD 39 and the Truong Sisters. Even the name "Viet Nam" probably has Chinese origins and means "land south of China". In 111 BC, Vietnam was conquered by China. In AD 939 at long last Vietnam obtained its independence from China. But the Chinese and the Mongols remained a threat for many centuries. Relations with China to this day – despite both being "communist" regimes – remain tense: history is more resilient than political ideology.

In the 19th Century, France was looking for a land or River Mekong route into China (which was then in a state of decay), as well to hinder British expansion into east Asia through Burma. The Mekong is the world's 12th longest river but it never did become a major commercial artery. However the Delta in the south was agriculturally very rich and France did well from its colonization. The French invasion began in 1858 and was completed by 1884. French rule was resisted but unsuccessfully.

Nationalist leader Ho Chi Minh declared the independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam on September 2 1945. He was one of Asia's most colourful leaders in the 20th Century and there is a continuing debate on some of his early history. During World War II, when Japan overran French Indochina, he became by default an ally of the US. At one point, when he was sick in the jungle, the Office for Strategic Services (OSS), the forerunner of the CIA, saved his life by dropping in some medicine for him.

After the war, France tried to regain control of the country. The French complained that the Viet Minh would not fight a conventional battle and instead waged a guerrilla struggle (as they had done so well against the Japanese). With the height of arrogance, the French created a fort at Dien Bien Phu in a valley, west of Hanoi. When questioned about the risk of being attacked from the surrounding hills, a French officer remarked that the Viet Minh had no artillery; even if they did they would not be able to transport it to this valley; and even if they could do that, they would not know how to use it. When the first artillery round landed in the camp, he committed suicide because he knew that the French had lost. The Viet Minh had managed to transport disassembled parts of the artillery on the back of bicycles through the jungles and then reassembled them on the ridges around the valley. The French got their set piece battle and lost it.

At the 1954 Geneva Conference, the resulting Peace Accords meant that Vietnam was divided temporarily along the 17th Parallel to permit the French to leave the south. The Soviet Union and China both pressured the reluctant and suspicious Ho Chi Minh into accepting the deal so that they could avoid another Cold War confrontation with the US.

Just as Ho Chi Minh feared, the US refused to have the country reunited. It feared that Ho Chi Minh would come to power in a reunited country in a free election. In 1955 the US created the Republic of South Vietnam, headed by the anti-communist Ngo Dinh Diem. The “temporary” division of the country had become permanent – at least for two decades. In 1957 the insurgency began in the South.

Washington DC and Hanoi went on to fight two different types of “wars”. Hanoi fought a protracted guerrilla struggle (like the ones against Japan and France). Washington DC fought a “limited” conventional one, in which it expected that technology would win the day. This would require the minimum possible disruption to American civilian life. There would not be a World War II-type full-scale American mobilization of personnel or finance. The US financed the war through printing extra dollars (rather than through increased taxation) and so it debased its own currency. The US got gradually drawn deeper into the Vietnam quagmire. In 1960, US aid to the South was increased. The US also tried to get other allies (if only to show that this was an “international” effort, albeit with the bulk of the fighting done by the US). In 1962, for example, 30 Australian “advisers” were deployed. In total, about 50,000 Australian soldiers were to serve in Vietnam, of whom 504 were killed.

In November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. There is no agreement on how he would have fought the war had he lived. His admirers say that he would have looked for a way out of the war, while his critics claim that he would have been sucked deeper into it just like his successor. He was replaced by Lyndon Johnson, who had had no foreign affairs experience. He was determined not to be the first US president to lose a war.

On August 2 1964 came the Gulf of Tonkin “incident” by which the US destroyer the “Maddox” was attacked while spying off the North Vietnamese coast. The ship returned on August 4 with the “Turner Joy” and they apparently got attacked. An outraged media, public and Congress wanted immediate action. On August 7 1964 the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution gave the President the Congressional authorization to use force. This was the closest the US ever came to a formal declaration of war.

It seems that the August 4 1964 incident never took place. The nervous crews on the two US ships mistook the sounds of their own propellers for the sounds of enemy boats. The alarm was given and the firing commenced. After four hours of “activity” both ships left the area unharmed. Robert McNamara was Defence Secretary at the time. As we now know, though he publicly supported the war he privately thought it was a mistake and that the US could not win (a point of view also coming from CIA officers in the field). In 1995 he went back to Vietnam as an honoured guest and met with some of his ex-enemies. He asked military hero Vo Nguyen Giap why he did not issue a media statement back in August 1964 explaining that there had been no second attack. Easy, he replied in effect, the North Vietnamese were being credited with driving off two US warships – why not take the credit?

In mid-1965 came the major US build up, with an additional 200,000 troops deployed. In January 1968 the Tet Offensive occurred. This was supposed to be the last offensive to drive the US out. In fact Hanoi failed to drive the US out in one go but the US lost the media battle. For a few hours, the US Embassy in Saigon was overrun. This was not a major military event but it was a public relations disaster – if the US could not protect its own embassy then what hope was there for the rest of the country? In March 1968 Johnson announced that he would not seek re-election in the following November. Richard Nixon won that election (he was later forced from office in August 1974 because of the Watergate scandal). He was replaced by Gerald Ford.

In January 23 1973 there came the “Peace with Honour” Paris Agreement negotiated by Henry Kissinger. Most American personnel were removed. But not all of them. I met several of them when I was there in mid-1974.

On April 30 1975, the final offensive occurred and the US was driven out. Again the US Embassy in Saigon was the centre of the drama, with the helicopters evacuating people from a ladder on the rooftop. The embassy building has since been effectively demolished. The escape ladder is now on display in the President Gerald Ford Library in Michigan. A total of 58,000 Americans were killed in the war, with 2,500 still unaccounted for. After the war, Saigon was renamed Ho Chi Minh City (though it is still well known by its old name).

In July 1995, President Clinton’s US recognized the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. In November 2000, he visited Vietnam and there has been the normalization of relations

To conclude this survey of war, Cambodia is another traditional opponent. The great Cambodian empire was based at Ankor in the AD 9th-15th Centuries. The city had about a million people, when London had only a few thousand. Ankor Wat remains the largest religious building in world history. Cambodia got sucked into the Vietnam War in the late 1960s because the US suspected that the North was arming the South along the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” through Cambodia. The US started secretly to bomb Cambodia. Prince Sihanouk was overthrown in April 1970 by the US-backed Lon Nol.

In 1975 “Year Zero” began when the communist Pol Pot came to power and started his reign of terror. In 1978 Cambodian violence spilt over into Vietnam and Vietnam invaded Cambodia to end Pol Pot’s terrorism. China invaded Vietnam to “punish” it. In the early 1980s, Vietnam received few international thanks for getting rid of Pol Pot because it was supported by the USSR, while it was therefore opposed by the US, China, Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Australia (which all by default supported Pol Pot’s regime in exile). The higher politics of the Cold War were important than stopping Pol Pot’s genocide. Relations are now somewhat better with the Hanoi-backed government in power in Cambodia. For the first time in a century and a half, Vietnam is now at peace.

✓ Today

On April 25 1976, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) was created, with both parts of the country united. In 1977 the SRV was admitted to the United Nations. The SRV has 82 million people. They are a tough, resilient and uncomplaining people (as I saw first hand in the casualty areas in 1974).

But it is still a very poor country. It is 109th on UN Human Development Index (by comparison Australia is at 4th position, the US at 6th and the UK at 13th). The country has still not recovered from all its wars, such as the military damage, refugees and “social pollution” (drugs and prostitution). 75 per cent of the country is mountainous and much of it still remains unexplored. There are about 50 ethnic groups in the Highlands; each tribe has its own language. Many resent Hanoi’s influence and want to run their own affairs. There are continuing land border disputes with China. Vietnam is also one of the disputants to the Spratly Islands maritime disputes (involving China, Malaysia, Philippines, Taiwan and Brunei).

In 1975 the leadership tried to run the country on communist collectivist lines but failed. In the early 1980s there was an economic crisis, with inflation at 774 per cent in 1986 and extensive social disruption. In 1986 came the beginning of market forces: “Doi Moi” (“renovation” or “renewal”), to encourage domestic free enterprise and opening the country up to foreign investment. In 1995, the long lasting US trade embargo was lifted and a bilateral free trade agreement was signed in 2001. The impact of the 2001 agreement was immediate: Vietnam’s exports to the US doubled in 2002 and then doubled again in 2003 (to US\$4.5 billion). Vietnam

now has several foreign trade agreements. It is seeking to join the World Trade Organization (WTO), which will give further impetus to economic reforms.

The country still has a long way to go but it is now picking up under “Doi Moi”. There are still problems with corruption (an endemic problem throughout much of Asia) and the legal system needs reforming. But the average annual GDP growth rate is about 7 per cent. It survived almost unscathed the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The tourist industry is now an important foreign exchange earner. Foreigners are impressed with the forgiving nature of the Vietnamese in dealing with former Western invaders. Additionally flying on the national Vietnam Airlines is as good an experience as on any western airline – and far better than the bad old communist days of the Soviet Union’s Aeroflot. Vietnam has expanding overseas trade, for example, its former ordnance factory Chemical Company 21 created some of the fireworks used for the Sydney 2000 Olympics. The country aims to become an industrialized country by 2020.

✓ Tomorrow

To conclude, here are two scenarios on how the country could evolve in the coming decades. Scenarios are picture of the future to encourage us to think laterally.

The first scenario I call “Albania”. Like China, communist Vietnam has the dilemma of encouraging economic reform, without stimulating political reform. Marx predicted that economic change brings on political change. Gorbachev tried to address this issue with both economic reform and political reform (“glasnost” and “perestroika”). But he was swept away by all the changes he unleashed and not only did his communism disappear but so did the Soviet Union. Under this scenario, the flirtation with market reforms gets nowhere. The political administration does not really like them. It fears the risk of the loss of political power through democratization and so it clamps down on the political liberalization.

Meanwhile, diseases become even more of a problem. Examples include AIDS (especially from catering for tourists) and bird ‘flu (from peasants living too close to their charges). The deforestation continues at a rapid rate as the trees are exported, and good arable land is lost. The social cohesion is not maintained. There are problems with the ethnic groups in the Highlands, increasing unemployment in the cities and increasing drug addiction. The Mekong River is damaged by environmental problems (dams upstream, salinity downstream). Foreign tourists are too scared to travel to Vietnam partly because of health problems and because of the social unrest. Meanwhile, Vietnam remains vulnerable to unstable regimes in neighbouring Cambodia and Laos.

The Nightmare Scenario version is that China cannot manage its own economic and political transition and it falls into chaos, with some of the unrest spilling over into Vietnam. China is now undergoing the fastest rate of industrialization in world history. Not even the British, who

invented the Industrial Revolution in the 18th Century, grew as fast as China is now. But there is a fear that the pace of economic change will unleash political forces that the old men in power cannot control. Some of the chaos will spill over outside China.

But there is also a more optimistic scenario that I call “Japan”. Under this scenario, Vietnam recovers from its wars and it amazes the world with its rapid and sustained economic growth. It does not become an economic super power but it does become a “newly industrialized country” (NIC), like Malaysia, Taiwan and South Korea. (The latter was also devastated by war half a century ago but it now comes in at 27th position in the UN Human Development Index).

Under this scenario, Vietnam’s rice production makes it an Asian breadbasket (not least for China, which is losing its own top soil to roads and factories etc). The 2020 industrialization target is easily met. The industrialization process is helped by Vietnam learning the lessons of developed countries, for example, it leaps over the age of copper wires in telephones and goes straight into mobile telephones. Vietnam becomes an industrial zone for foreign manufacturers wanting cheap, educated and disciplined labour. It has no unions to cause problems.

There is good social cohesion; there is a strong sense of national identity; the tribal problems are solved (or at least contained); foreign tourism flourishes. The Mekong River becomes the River Danube of South East Asia

Only time will tell, which of these scenarios will come into play. Vietnam no longer has to worry about the traditional fears of the struggle for independence and reunification. Now it has a window of opportunity to make a dash for economic and social growth. My guess is that it will do well.

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